

September 2, 2018

WHO AM I?

What is it that makes us who we are? Is it our DNA? If it is, then we can figure that out pretty quickly. All we need to do is send a little sample to Ancestry.com or "23andMe" and in a matter of weeks we will have the answer - we will know who we are. Except I don't think that tells us who we are, I think that tells us how we're made ... So, if DNA doesn't tell us who we are, what about the lessons taught by our parents or our caregivers? What about what we learn in school? Is it all of the "stuff" from childhood that makes us who we are? I know my alphabet and my numbers; I learned how to share, how to compete, to be quiet; I even learned how to make my bed and do laundry - and I can make a pretty mean pot of soup! Is that who I am? I think that tells me more about what I can do but not necessarily who I am. Okay, so what about the people we become as adults? There are a million different responsibilities once we venture out from under the protective umbrella of our parents - and then so very many more when we become parents ourselves. We become responsible for groceries, rents and mortgages, car payments; the safety of our own children; working with others; handling conflict on our own... But I think that tells you HOW I am, but again, not WHO I am.

I got really stuck here thinking aren't all of these things a part of Who I am? And I got really hung up on "What makes us who we are"... The more I thought about it this week, the more I began to wonder, in the long run, does it really matter? Is it really that important what it is that makes us who we are or is the important question simply who are we?

Let's look at this logically... as logical as I get, which I've been told is a little skewed... So in the quest of finding who we are, let's start simple...

We all have our given names, mine is Diana; and we all have titles to our professions - to what we do for a living - and right now, mine is Pastor. Ryan is a student and a crew member at Kwik Trip. Dave is a business entrepreneur. Tara's

title is changing this year and now she is a teacher. We all have our names and we have titles for what it is that we do; are these our descriptors? Do these two things, my name and my title, really tell you who I am?

I don't question that they tell you something about me... My name gives you a more personal point of contact. You and I can create a more personal relationship by using our given names. What would it be like without given names? There would be a lot of "Umm, hey you... no, not you, you... No! You! Yes, you. Thank you." And by the time we get the right "you", we don't remember what we wanted to say and we are not going to build a relationship because it's too hard and not worth all the frustration. So, I am glad we have names! Given names are good, they help us identify each other. My name doesn't tell you who I am, it is simply a way for you to identify me.

What about my profession? What I choose to do for a living, to fill the time in my day. My profession can tell you something. Maybe it tells you whether or not I am comfortable talking to large groups of people; maybe it tells you a little bit about whether I am a leader or a follower; maybe it gives you a little insight into what makes me tick. What I choose to do, my profession, may give you an idea of what is important to me, but it doesn't really tell you who I am.

How do we answer the question: "Who Am I?". It is confusing and seems to be so complicated; but who we are isn't really that complicated. I already made arguments against DNA, teachings, given names, or professions telling us who we are. The answer to the question "Who Am I?" is much less concrete than any of those things...

I would like to take a few minutes here to compare us to pencils. A little bizarre, but stay with me on this one, it will make sense...

I read a story the other day about a pencil maker. The story goes like this...

The pencil's tale

An old pencil maker took his newest pencil aside, just before he was about to pack him into a box. Imagining the little fellow as a person he recalled a few things about the pencil.

"There are five things you need to know," he said to his pencil, "before I send you out into the world. Always remember these five things - never forget them - and you will become the best pencil you can be!

"The first thing is to remember that you will be able to do many great things, but only if you put yourself in someone else's hands.

A pencil can only do what it was created for, become the best at being what it is, if it is held in someone's hand. By itself, the pencil is just a piece of wood with some pretty cool insides. In someone's hand, this piece of wood, using what it has on the inside, can do great things! This lesson holds true for each one of us. We are all capable of doing great things, but not by ourselves. We must put ourselves in someone else's hands. We must put ourselves in God's hands and with everything we have on the inside, we must trust in Him. "Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight." (Proverbs 3:5-6) In His hands he will keep us on the right path, the path to do great things, the path that allows us to do many things through Him who gives us strength. (Philippians 4:13)

The second thing the maker wanted the pencil to remember was that:

"From time to time you will experience a painful sharpening, but remember that this will make you a better pencil." Just as the pencil gets worn down and needs to be brought back, so do we. Life isn't always easy. Sometimes it is so hard, so painful, we just can't imagine the purpose of whatever it is we are going through. You've heard it before "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger"; well, it's true. And we are assured of this in scripture: "And the God of all grace, who called you to his eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm and steadfast." (1Peter 5:10) And from Romans 5: "...because we know that suffering produces perseverance." Sometimes

coming back from being worn down isn't easy - even a little painful - but allowing God to restore us, to re-sharpen us, makes us better.

Next, the maker told the pencil to *"keep in mind that you will be able to correct any mistakes you might make along the way."* And it doesn't take much to correct the mistake - just a little conscious thought and a little perseverance. The pencil need only flip over and make amends, we can do the same. Acts 3:19 "Repent then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord..." We are not perfect. We will make mistakes - I venture to say that over our lifetimes, we will make many mistakes. And isn't it awesome, that like the pencil, we can correct our mistakes? We have been gifted the ability to clean the slate and start fresh by the grace of God. "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9). We can, with true repentance and forgiveness, correct our mistakes.

The maker then gave the pencil his most important piece of advice. He told the pencil that *"...the most important part of you is what's on the inside."* How many teeth marks, cracks and breaks, gouges, or scratches will there be on the outside of a pencil? Over our life times, we too will get a little beat up from time to time and that will have an affect on our appearance. God gave us clear direction in this area. We are not to be overly concerned with what we see on the outside: How does this person dress? Does she wear makeup? Does she wear too much makeup? Are they clean? Do they smell?... These things may hold some value as we do our best to live in community, but they are NOT the most important things about the people we meet. This lesson is made clear to us in Samuel as God told him "Do not consider his appearance or his height... The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." (1 Samuel 16:7) Maybe the outside is a little chewed up, but it is the inside that is important.

With these lessons imparted upon his pencil, the maker gave one final, clear bit of instruction. He told the pencil, "*remember this, upon every surface that you are used, you must leave your mark. No matter what else happens, you must continue to write.*" We too, must leave our mark. Leave our "mark" by working as the hands and feet of Christ; by sharing the word; by never underestimating the difference we make in the lives of others. We leave our mark by following the instructions of our maker: "Whoever turns a sinner from the error of their way will save them from death and cover over a multitude of sins." (James 5:20) and "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation." (Mark 16:15). As the pencil was never to quit writing, we are never to quit. There are countless verses in the bible - literally countless - that address this, but I believe the most clear instruction for this task comes not in any of the words, but in the example of Paul. In his letters to the Corinthians, Paul imparted this lesson to us by writing: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:1) Paul never quit, a lot of "bad" happened to Paul, but he never quit.

Who Am I? Just as the pencil, I am a product of my maker. And I will put myself in someone else's hands; I will put myself in God's hands. I will remember that after I suffer, I will be restored; I can correct my mistakes, be forgiven for my sins; I hold inside the most important part, the grace of the Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit; and I will work to leave my mark on the world. Who Am I? I am a Child of God.

You too, are a Child of God. In everything you do, everything you say, every encounter you have with another of God's creatures, remember who you are. When someone asks you, when you question yourself: Who Am I? Your answer is: "I am a child of God". Remember that, let me help you remember that by asking you right now: "Who Are You?" And you answer: *I am a Child of God.* AMEN